

Reclaiming the Commons: Art and Activism in the Neoliberal City

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ABSTRACT

How can artistic/activist practices respond to urban conditions of exclusion and inequality? Since the 1970s, urban redevelopment in the United States has been dominated by a neoliberal ideology that promotes privatization, deregulation and the withdrawal of the state from the provision of social services. As a result, urban resources such as public space, affordable housing, health care, food and education are increasingly transformed into private property. Against the neoliberal privatization of resources in the city, my work is dedicated to reclaiming public spaces and building relationships based on cooperation, solidarity and sharing resources in common.

This thesis attempts to situate my practice as an artist and activist within a broader historical and theoretical framework. Part 1 defines the seemingly archaic terms “enclosure” and “the commons.” Parts 2 and 3 update these terms for the twenty-first century, addressing the “new enclosures” of neoliberalism and the emergence of the alter-globalization movement. In parts 4 and 5, I describe the conditions of the neoliberal city and examine a specific case study in East Baltimore. Part 6 introduces the concept of “the right to the city.” Part 7 presents an overview of my own formation as an artist and activist committed to the project of reclaiming the commons. Finally, in part 8, I reflect on the first phase of the Occupy movement and consider its potential to reconfigure the boundaries between art, politics, urbanism and everyday life.

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Introduction

On the morning of April 6, 2012, a group of 50 students, artists, planners, educators, activists and gardeners took part in a bus tour of community gardens in Boston. The tour, which I organized as part of my thesis project, was intended to function as an expanded seminar, exploring the local history of gardens as sites of struggle for community land control, food security and self-determination. The tour made several stops in the South End and Roxbury, where we heard the voices of organizers who have been active in the community garden movement since the 1970s, including Julie Kepes Stone and Mel King.¹ For me, community gardens embody the politics of reclaiming the commons against the neoliberal privatization of resources in the city: appropriating vacant land, producing local food and building relationships based on cooperation, solidarity and sharing resources in common.

This tour builds upon a series of projects I have organized during my time in the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology (ACT), which have often involved walking as a form of research and action. In the fall of 2010, I collaborated with Jessica Fain, a student in the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP), to coordinate a walking tour of the Charles River. We invited urban planner and historian Karl Haglund, author of *Inventing the Charles River* (MIT Press, 2002), to guide the walk and facilitate a discussion about the historical geography and political ecology of the river. This project was conceived within the context of Art, Architecture and Urbanism in Dialogue, taught

¹ Julie Kepes Stone was active as a community garden organizer in Boston in the 1970s and 80s. She is currently working on a book about the gardening movement. Her father, Gyorgy Kepes, founded the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT in 1967. As an artist and educator, Kepes was an early advocate of “art on a civic scale” which engaged with the environment and new technologies. Mel King is a Boston-based educator, youth worker, social activist, community organizer, developer, elected politician and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) at MIT.

by Professor Gediminas Urbonas in ACT. In the spring of 2011, Jessica Fain and I organized another walking tour for Studio Seminar in Public Art, taught by Professor Antonio Muntadas. Both of these walks are part of a larger initiative to generate dialogue and collaboration between ACT and DUSP.

In what follows, I will elaborate on many of the themes explored on the tour, situating my own position as an artist and activist within a broader history of struggles to reclaim the commons. My argument moves from a global historical perspective to a local focus on the city as a site of intervention. Part 1 defines the terms “enclosure” and “the commons.” Parts 2 and 3 update these terms for the twenty-first century, addressing the “new enclosures” of neoliberalism and the emergence of the alter-globalization movement. In parts 4 and 5, I describe the conditions of the neoliberal city and examine a specific case study in East Baltimore. Part 6 introduces the concept of “the right to the city.” Part 7 presents a personal overview of my own formation as an artist and activist working on collaborative, socially engaged projects in Baltimore between 2005-10. Finally, in part 8, I reflect on the first phase of the Occupy movement and consider its potential to reconfigure the boundaries between art, politics, urbanism and everyday life. My methodology is informed by an interdisciplinary range of discourses including urban studies, critical theory, Marxism, anarchism, feminism, geography, political philosophy and art history.

1. Enclosure vs. the Commons

The seemingly archaic terms “enclosure” and “the commons” continue to provide a useful theoretical and historical framework for understanding struggles against neoliberal privatization today. Enclosure is the process by which commonly held resources such as land, forests, fisheries, public spaces and culture are transformed into private property, separating people from the means of subsistence and social reproduction. In sixteenth- to eighteenth-century England, the term was used to describe the process that ended the ancient system of arable farming in open fields. Under enclosure, such land is fenced (enclosed) and deeded to a landowner. Between 1785-1830, Sweeping Enclosure Acts led to millions of acres of commonly held land being fenced off, putting over half of all cultivated land in England into private hands.

In *Capital*, Volume 1, Marx develops his theory of “primitive accumulation” around the example of enclosure, arguing that rich landowners used their control of state power to appropriate common land for private profit. Marx concludes that the enclosure of the commons created the preconditions for industrial capitalism by dispossessing workers of access to land used for subsistence farming, foraging and collecting fire wood, therefore creating an impoverished landless working class forced to provide labor for the growing industries in the north of England: “these new freedmen became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production, and of all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And the history of this, of their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”²

² Karl Marx, “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation,” *Capital*, Volume 1, ch. 26.

The commons can be defined as non-commodified resources—land, forests, water, public spaces—which are shared in common and provide the means of fulfilling peoples needs. More importantly, the commons are created and sustained through a set of social relations and practices known as *commoning*. As the historian R.H. Tawney describes, in sixteenth-century England, many cottagers and day laborers did not own arable land but in practice used the commons for grazing livestock. “It was the essence of the open field system of agriculture, its maintenance reposed upon a common custom and tradition, not upon documentary records capable of precise construction.” This “miniature cooperative society” as Tawney called it, was managed by a kind of “practical communism” based on social relations of mutual aid, reciprocity, hospitality, cooperation and trust.³

As feminist Marxist scholar and activist Silvia Federici defines it, the commons exist between the “public” and “private,” but are irreducible to either category. The commons “expresses a broader conception of property, referring to social goods—lands, territories, forests, meadows and streams, or communicative spaces—which a community, not the state or any individual, collectively owns, manages and controls.”⁴ This definition is important because it distinguishes between the commons and the more familiar category of the “public,” which presupposes the existence of a market economy and private property.

In an influential article entitled “The Tragedy of the Commons,” published in 1968, American sociobiologist Garret Hardin argued that individuals acting in their own self-interest will ultimately over-consume and deplete shared limited resources. Citing examples of overfishing in the worlds oceans and overgrazing on common land, Hardin

³ R.H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Longmans, 1912), 235.

⁴ Silvia Federici, “Women, Land Struggles and the Reconstruction of the Commons,” *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Vol 14, March 2011, 1.

concludes that “freedom in a commons brings ruin to all,”⁵ and suggests that the only way to prevent this tragedy is through strict government regulation or privatization. It may be true that under capitalist market conditions, rational individuals acting in their own economic self-interest will exploit common resources, but as Peter Linebaugh points out, Hardin’s critique “depends on absolute egoism and denies several millennia of experience in the mutuality and negotiation of commoning.”⁶ For example, George Caffentzis has shown how the lobster coasts of Maine are co-managed as a commons by fishermen through a combination of informal “deals” and formal laws, which preserve the resource for all who depend on it for their livelihood.

The most definitive argument against Hardin’s “Tragedy of the Commons” theory comes from Elinor Ostrom, who in 2009 became the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize in economics for her research on the ways in which humans interact with ecosystems to maintain the long-term sustainability of common-pool resources such as forests, fisheries, grazing lands and irrigation systems. Ostrom looked at the management of pastures by locals in Africa and irrigation system management in the villages of western Nepal, demonstrating how societies develop diverse institutional arrangements for managing natural resources and avoiding ecosystem collapse. As Ostrom concludes: “A frequent finding is that when users of a common-pool resource organize themselves to devise and enforce their own basic rules, they tend to manage local resources more sustainably than when rules are externally imposed on them.”⁷

⁵ Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162, December 1968.

⁶ Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto* (University of California Press: 2008) 9.

⁷ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and “Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, 137.

2. The New Enclosures

Today, once again, the Enclosures are the common denominator of proletarian experience across the globe. In the biggest diaspora of the century, on every continent millions are being uprooted from their land, their jobs, their homes through wars, famines, plagues, and the IMF ordered devaluations (the four knights of the modern apocalypse) and scattered to the corners of the globe.

—Midnight Notes Collective, *The New Enclosures* (1990)

At the heart of capitalist modernity has been a process of endless enclosure. The great work of the past half-millennium was the cutting off of the world's natural and human resources from common use. Land, water, the fruits of the forest, the spaces of custom and communal negotiation, the mineral substrate, the life of rivers and oceans, the very airwaves—capitalism has depended, and still depends, on more and more of these shared properties being shared no longer, whatever the violence or absurdity involved in converting the stuff of humanity into this or that item for sale.

—Retort, *Afflicted Powers* (2005)

In *Capital*, Volume 1, Marx demonstrated how the development of industrial capitalism depended on the process of primitive accumulation and enclosure, which assembled a working class by separating people from the means of subsistence and destroying their capacity to organize social reproduction outside of the market. As long as workers had the capacity to live self-sufficiently on the basis of their own labor, they had no motivation to sell their labor to capitalists for a wage. This is why the separation process, in Marx's words, was "written in letters of fire and blood."⁸ The secret of primitive accumulation is that the origin of capitalism had to be violent.

One historical limitation of Marx's analysis, however, is the assumption that primitive (or original) accumulation took place only once *before* capitalist development could occur. From a contemporary perspective, we can see that primitive accumulation and enclosure have been a *continuous* feature of capitalist development, which seeks

⁸ Karl Marx, "The Secret of Primitive Accumulation," *Capital*, Volume 1, ch. 26.

boundless expansion and is therefore always in need of new spheres of life to commodify. Indeed, the entire history of western imperialism and colonialism can be viewed as a long process of enclosure, also known as privatization, separation, expropriation, theft or what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession.”⁹ Here, I will focus on the most recent chapter in this history: neoliberal globalization.

Neoliberalism is an economic doctrine based on privatization, deregulation and the withdrawal of the state from the provision of social services. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has been the dominant ideology driving the global economy, characterized by the privatization of state property; the elimination of legal barriers to the free flow of capital (the promotion of free markets and free trade); the deregulation of the activities of corporations; and the imposition of austerity measures to dramatically cut state services, employment and budgets. Under neoliberalism, the role of the state is reduced to creating and preserving the institutional framework needed to ensure the smooth functioning of free markets, and to providing the necessary military, defense, police, and legal structures required to secure private property rights.¹⁰

Since the early-1980s, a neoliberal agenda has been aggressively pursued on a global scale by international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). After increasing lending to less developed countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, these institutions coercively leveraged the debt to impose Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) aimed at privatizing public resources, removing import controls and food subsidies, and downsizing public sector programs in health and education.

⁹ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, (Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Just as the English enclosures of the eighteenth century created a new population of urban slum dwellers in Manchester by robbing the commoners of their means of subsistence, the “SAPing of the Third World” in the 1980s corresponded with the unprecedented explosion of slum populations in the global South. As Mike Davis argues in his book *Planet of Slums*, “The 1980s—when the IMF and World Bank used the leverage of debt to restructure the economies of most of the Third World—are the years when slums became an implacable future not just for poor rural migrants, but also for millions of traditional urbanites displaced or immiserated by the violence of ‘adjustment.’”¹¹

In addition to undermining state sovereignty, the SAPs functioned to destroy the basis of common property that had been defended by indigenous people for centuries. The most obvious type of common property is land (arable, pasture and forest), but as Indian activist, theorist and eco-feminist Vandana Shiva argues, the “new enclosures” of neoliberal globalization expanded to include other resources once held in common: “Land and forests were the first resources to be 'enclosed' and converted from commons to commodities. Later on, water resources were 'enclosed' through dams, groundwater mining and privatization schemes. Now it is the turn of biodiversity and knowledge to be 'enclosed' through intellectual property rights (IPRs).”¹²

Many local movements mobilized against these new enclosures, sometimes taking up arms to do so. George Caffentzis describes a “world wide war for land and in defense of the commons” that took place in the 1980s, but “passed largely unnoticed since it

¹¹ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006) 152.

¹² Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 2005).

appeared under a variety of confusing rubrics.” For example, in Central America and Mexico, armed struggle over the control of land was often referred to as part of the “drug problem” or the “spread of communism.” In West Africa, armed struggle against the expropriation of communal land along the Niger Delta by oil companies was frequently discussed as “tribal war.” In South Africa, struggles over land control were understood within the context of the anti-apartheid movement. In India, the Chipko movement fighting to protect the forest as a commons was reductively dismissed in the western media as a women’s movement of “tree huggers.”¹³ It was not until the early-1990s that a new movement of resistance would emerge capable of articulating and connecting these disparate struggles to reclaim the commons.

3. Another World is Possible

On January 1, 1994, the Zapatista rebels emerged from the Lacandon rainforest of Chiapas for the first time. The new year marked the beginning of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a treaty that threatened the Zapatistas’ land rights. Article 27 had been eliminated from the Mexican constitution, jeopardizing land reforms fought for by folk hero and revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, which had created a nationwide system of collectively owned and cultivated land. The Zapatistas took control of seven cities, set prisoners free, set fire to police headquarters and expropriated weapons found there, occupied City Halls, secured major highways, and declared war against the Mexican Government and the policies they called *neoliberalismo*.

Many of these courageous women and men, masked and wearing multicolored

¹³ George Caffentzis, “A Tale of Two Conferences: Globalization, the Crisis of Neoliberalism and Question of the Commons,” December 1, 2010, commoner.org

clothing, were armed only with rifle shaped sticks and toy guns. Their most powerful weapons were their words. They said they were “leading by obeying”; that they were invisible people who had “masked themselves in order to be seen”; that they didn’t want to seize power for themselves, but break it into small pieces that everyone could hold. The war lasted twelve days, until Mexican civil society demanded a cease-fire and peace negotiations. But the Zapatistas’ cry of “Ya Basta!” (Enough!), and their poetic communiqués posted on the Internet echoed around the world.¹⁴

At the time, the Zapatista uprising seemed to come from out of nowhere. The 1990s were a period of triumph for global capitalism. The old enemy of the Soviet Empire had collapsed and with it the remaining opposition to the capitalist system. As Margret Thatcher famously declared, “there is no alternative.” Or, as Francis Fukuyama notoriously argued, it was “the end of history.”¹⁵ However, as we have seen, this so-called “Washington Consensus” was being contested by local movements all over the world. What was missing was the language to connect these diverse struggles against a common enemy.

The Zapatistas named the enemy: neoliberal globalization. They also introduced a new form of politics that would inspire a generation of activists. Claiming to have no leaders, the Zapatistas practiced a horizontal form of politics that led by following the will of the people. They did not march on the capital to seize the state, nor did they want to secede from it. What they wanted was autonomy and democracy, “nothing for ourselves alone, but everything for everyone.”¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ya Basta!: Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising – The Writings of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos* (Oakland: AK Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

¹⁶ Ibid.

Activists from around the world declared their solidarity with the Zapatista autonomous zones. Suddenly, a new political framework had emerged that could connect Reclaim the Streets activists in London with the MST movement of landless farmers in Brazil; hackers in the free software movement and farmers burning genetically modified crops in India. Using the Internet to circulate information, this broad international social movement began to recognize a common struggle against the enclosures of neoliberal globalization. In the mainstream (or corporate) media, the movement became commonly referred to as anti-globalization. But many activists rejected this name in favor of counter-globalization, alter-globalization, the global justice movement, or “the movement of movements,” arguing that they were not opposed to the process of globalization, just a certain kind of capitalist globalization which privileges the rights of corporations over people. As Noam Chomsky later explained:

“The term “globalization” has been appropriated by the powerful to refer to a specific form of international economic integration, one based on investor rights, with the interests of people incidental. Accordingly, advocates of other forms of globalization are described as “anti-globalization,” though it is a term of propaganda that should be dismissed with ridicule. No sane person is opposed to globalization, that is, international integration. Surely not the left and the workers movements, which were founded on the principle of international solidarity—that is, globalization in a form that attends to the rights of people, not private power systems.”¹⁷

In 1996 the Zapatistas organized the first ‘International Encuentro (encounter) Against Neoliberalism and For Humanity’ in the rainforests of Chiapas. This was the first international gathering of anti-globalization activists. Also in 1996, arguably the first

¹⁷ Noam Chomsky, Interview, *The Croatian Tribune*, April 27, 2002.

anti-globalization counter-summit took place in Manila in the Philippines, where 130,000 protesters took to the streets to demonstrate against the Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC), where they were met with riot police and tear gas. In 1997, another Zapatista-inspired *Encuentro* led to the creation in 1998 of Peoples' Global Action, a network of grassroots social movements committed to resisting capitalism with direct action. This international network coordinated days of action targeting the WTO in May 1998 and the G8 in 1999 with a global Carnival against Capital.

But it was not until November 30, 1999, that the movement made headlines in the western mainstream media when a broad coalition of anti-globalization activists and local unions shut down the WTO meeting in Seattle. More than 700 organizations and over 75,000 people took part in the protests, which preventing the opening ceremony from happening. The protests were met with a level of militarized police violence that had not been seen since the civil rights movement and antiwar demonstrations of the 1960s.¹⁸

Days later the summit collapsed due to the refusal of trade representatives from Africa and the Caribbean to sign onto a new round of trade liberalization. The *Los Angeles Times* reported: "On the tear gas-shrouded streets of Seattle, the unruly forces of democracy collided with the elite world of trade policy. And when the meeting ended in failure on Friday, the elitists had lost and the debate had changed forever."¹⁹ The French newspaper *Le Monde* ran a headline stating: "The twenty-first century started in Seattle."

The following two years saw a cycle of activist convergences and counter-summits from Prague to Davos to Cancun to Quebec. These protests faced escalating police violence and repression. In 2001, the first World Social Forum (WSF) was held in Porto

¹⁸ Jeffery St. Clair, "Seattle Diary," *5 Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond* (Verso: 2000).

¹⁹ Jonathan Peterson, "Inside, Outside Forces Change WTO Forever," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1999.

Alegre, Brazil, under the slogan “Another World is Possible.”

Most accounts locate the end of this first stage of the anti-globalization movement at the protests against the G8 Summit in Genoa in July, 2001. The protests were massive, with over 200,000 activists taking to the streets attempting to shut down the Summit. But the state responded with a violent, militarized crackdown that left hundreds injured and 23-year-old activist Carlo Giuliani shot dead by police. The events in Genoa, followed by the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the so-called “War on Terror” signaled the exhaustion of certain tactics of militant direct action and increasingly violent confrontations with police, which were now too easily labeled as “terrorist.”

At the conclusion of *We are Everywhere*, the essential book on the global anticapitalist movement, the editors write:

“What Genoa and September 11 marked, in fact, was the end of the first, emergent stage of the movement that had erupted in 1994. It showed up some of the limitations of a momentum and event-based politics that concentrated primarily on interrupting and delegitimizing economic institutions. And so, against the spectacle, we turned our attention to the politics of necessity. We switched our attention away from the rapid explosions of the days of action for slow-burning, gradually built, but enormous fires.”²⁰

²⁰ *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, edited by Notes from Nowhere (New York: Verso, 2003), 503.

The Decade from Hell

The post-9/11 decade was a period of political depression and disillusionment for many young people and activists. As *TIME Magazine* put it on the cover of its December 2009 issue, it was “The Decade from Hell.” To summarize, I’ve copied a short list/poem that I wrote in the summer of 2010:

*The twenty-first century started in Seattle,
Y2K, Empire, Bush, Genoa, 9/11,
USA PATRIOT Act, Afghanistan, Guantanamo, WMDs,
Waterboarding, Iraq, Falluja, Abu Ghraib, Hadditha,
Black Water, Predator Drones, Climate Change,
V Tech, Banlieue Riots, Planet of Slums, Dubai,
DC Sniper, Katrina, FEMA,
Darfur, Mumbai, Sub-prime Meltdown,
Derivatives, Financial Crisis,
Madoff, Hope, Change,
Oakland, Gaza, Greece,
The Great Recession, The Coming Insurrection,
Lebanon, Fort Hood, Health Care, Copenhagen,
Detroit, Yemen, Haiti, Deepwater Horizon*

A sign of things to come which ultimately ended in disappointment: the February 15, 2003 global anti-war demonstrations against the US invasion of Iraq. An unprecedented event involving between six and thirty million people taking to the streets in cities around the world, it was the largest anti-war protest in history. In response, New York Times reporter Patrick Tyler wrote: “The huge anti-war demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.”²¹ President Bush’s response: “Size of protest—it’s like deciding, well, I’m going to decide policy based upon a focus group.”²²

²¹ Patrick Tyler, “A New Power in the Streets,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2003.

²² Todd S. Purdum, “Focus Groups? To Bush the Crowd was a Blur,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 2003.

But despite the repression of dissent and political protest associated with the Bush era, as well as the disillusionment many young people felt after the unsuccessful anti-war demonstrations, the period from 2001-2011 was marked by a latent, small-scale, localized activism. As Naomi Klein wrote presciently in 2001:

“What is now the anti-globalization movement must turn into thousands of local movements, fighting the way neoliberal politics are playing out on the ground: homelessness, wage stagnation, rent escalation, police violence, prison explosion, criminalization of migrant workers, and on and on. These are also struggles about all kinds of prosaic issues: the right to decide where the local garbage goes, to have good public schools, to be supplied with clean water. At the same time, the local movements fighting privatization and deregulation on the ground need to link their campaigns into one large global movement, which can show where their particular issues fit into an international economic agenda being enforced around the world.”²³

The decade saw the rise of the local food movement, a proliferation of urban farms and community gardens (often illegally occupying vacant lots), free schools, a growing anarchist-punk-DIY culture, infoshops, underground restaurants, independent media, artist collectives, “social practice,” and a growing interest in climate change and sustainability. While many of these initiatives are easily dismissed on their own as ineffective, idealistic and easily co-opted, taken together they represent a decentralized movement against the neoliberal privatization and commodification of everyday life.

²³ Naomi Klein, “Reclaiming the Commons,” *New Left Review*, May-June 2001.

4. Neoliberal Urbanism

Shifting scales of analysis, we now turn from the global to the local, examining the impact of neoliberal policies on the city. Since the 1970s, urban redevelopment in the United States has been dominated by a neoliberal ideology that promotes economic growth as the primary goal of policy. At the same time, deindustrialization and globalization have led to increased competition between cities for private investment. According to the logic of neoliberalism, government intervention should be limited so as not to inhibit the freedom of market activity. As a result, many functions that were once performed by elected officials are now managed by public-private partnerships, and important decisions regarding the allocation of resources are made behind closed doors. In short, the neoliberal city operates like a business, privileging efficiency over transparency and private profit over other considerations such as equity, social justice, and democracy.²⁴

There are many legitimate reasons for urban redevelopment: aging infrastructure, abandonment, disinvestment, segregation; the need for affordable housing, public amenities and jobs. For most of the twentieth-century, urban planning aimed to improve the built environment of cities for the well-being of all residents, investing public resources in infrastructure, amenities and housing. But since the 1970s, in response to the post-fordist shift from an industrial manufacturing to a service-based economy, the aim of urban planning and redevelopment policy has focused primarily on creating and attracting private investors and businesses. This has involved the invention of various tax incentives and subsidies designed to create a “good business climate.”

²⁴ Susan Fainstein, *The Just City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 8.

Neoliberal cities increasingly rely on the private sector to compensate for a weakened national welfare state. For example, in recent decades we have seen an almost complete dismantling of public housing in the US and a shift towards giving private developers incentives to build affordable housing in the form of Low Income Tax Credits (LITC). In the commercial realm, as post-industrial cities are reinvented as destinations for tourism, entertainment and consumerism, development has been concentrated on offices, retail malls, sports stadiums, convention centers and hotels. Such projects are often publicly subsidized through the use of tax increment financing (TIF) and payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) bonds. In the discourse of redevelopment, these subsidies are justified by a kind of “trickle-down” theory of economics, which argues that downtown development will create jobs and lead to increased tax revenues that benefit the wider community. However, as we shall see in the following case study, thirty years of neoliberal urbanism has produced a city with greater economic inequality, new social and spatial exclusions, uneven development, gentrification and displacement. A central feature of neoliberal urbanism is enclosure or what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,” which consists of “the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights. The state, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality, plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting these processes.”²⁵

²⁵ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, (Oxford University Press, 2003), 145.

5. Urban Redevelopment in East Baltimore

Capitalists open spaces for urban redevelopment, for example, by dispossessing low-income populations from high-value spaces at the lowest cost possible ... In countries with firmly established private property rights, seizure by eminent domain can be orchestrated by the state on behalf of private capital ... It seems sometimes as if there is a systematic plan to expel low-income and unwanted populations from the face of the earth.

—David Harvey

In January 2001, then-Mayor Martin O'Malley announced an ambitious plan to transform 88 acres of East Baltimore into a biotech park and mixed-use commercial/residential community. The neighborhood, known as “Middle East,” was home to over 700 low-income African American families, many of whom had lived in their houses for generations. In 2004, the City used its power of eminent domain to acquire all of the properties in the neighborhood, forcibly relocating the residents and beginning a process of demolition that would constitute one of the largest urban redevelopment projects in United States history.

Ten years later—in part due to the recession, an inability to attract biotech companies and the mismanagement (or corruption) of the nonprofit East Baltimore Development Inc. (EBDI)—the \$1.8 billion project is effectively stalled, leaving in its wake blocks of vacant lots, boarded houses and a community displaced, victim to what David Harvey has called “accumulation by dispossession.”²⁶ In this section I will examine the history of the project, known as The New East Baltimore, as a case study in the failure of neoliberal urbanization.

In order to understand the situation in Middle East Baltimore we must put it in a

²⁶ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, (Oxford University Press, 2003), 145.

broader context of racial segregation and economic inequality. Since at least the 1960s, the decline of the neighborhood was stimulated by discriminatory trends and policies that put residents at a severe disadvantage. Some examples would include the practice of redlining, where banks would refuse to give mortgages to homebuyers in African American neighborhoods that were literally outlined in red on the map; real estate speculation, which led private investors to buy vacant houses and “flip” them at a quick profit; and “land banking,” where private investors (including Johns Hopkins University) would buy houses and allow them to sit boarded up and vacant. The so-called “white flight” of middle class residents to the suburbs following the riots of the late-1960s also contributed to the abandonment of the neighborhood.²⁷ In addition, a general disinvestment of commercial resources such as grocery stores, as well as public services such as schools, community centers, and trash collection added to the decline. Since the 1980s, the introduction of heroin and crack cocaine and the violent drug trade associated with them have had devastating effects. In the 1990s, the “War on Drugs” essentially criminalized the entire neighborhood, where much of the drug activity in East Baltimore had been concentrated.

By the late-1990s, Middle East had deteriorated to a point where more than half of the houses were vacant and a majority of the population was living in poverty and suffering from related social, environmental, and public health problems. A series of articles in *The Baltimore Sun* labeled the neighborhood “Zombieland,” and Middle East

²⁷ The population of Baltimore declined by more than one-third between 1950 and 2010, from 949,708 to 620,961. In 1970 there were 7,000 abandoned houses in the city, by 1998 there were over 40,000. Baltimore’s rapid depopulation must also be viewed in relation to deindustrialization: the city lost two-thirds of its manufacturing employment after 1960 (a net loss of over 100,000 jobs).

would later be used as the location of “Hamsterdam” in the third season of the HBO drama *The Wire*.

With its high levels of poverty and crime (and the public health problems that these conditions produce), Middle East presented a serious public relations concern to Johns Hopkins University, whose hospital and medical campus are located directly to the south of the neighborhood. For decades, the relationship between the world-class medical institution and the Middle East community had been tense. Residents had always viewed Hopkins with suspicion because of its role in land banking, which contributed to the abandonment of the neighborhood, as well as its controversial use of residents as test subjects, including one infamous study in which children were exposed to lead paint.²⁸ Yet this tension was complicated by the fact that Hopkins, as the largest private employer in the State, provided some of the few local jobs. It was no secret that Hopkins had an interest in expanding its campus and gentrifying the neighborhood, the only question was how this would be accomplished. It is within this context that we have to view The New East Baltimore redevelopment project, which exemplifies neoliberal urbanization by using eminent domain²⁹ to acquire 88 acres of land—displacing over 800 households—and giving it to private developers, along with \$212.6 million in public subsidies.

How did such an unprecedented public-private land grab take place? How was it politically legitimized? In what follows, I will argue that it was only by framing the redevelopment as an emergency response to a “disaster” situation that the city, Johns

²⁸ Tamar Lewin, “U.S. Investigating Johns Hopkins Study of Lead Paint Hazard,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2001. Manuel Roig-Franzia, “My Kids Were Used as Guinea Pigs,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2001.

²⁹ Eminent Domain is the state’s power to take privately owned land for development that benefits “the public good.” However, the 2005 *Kelo v. New London* Supreme Court case ruled in favor of using eminent domain for a private development, arguing that the job creation and increased tax revenue of the private development constituted a benefit to “the public good,” therefore radically expanding the state’s power to expropriate land.

Hopkins and EBDI were able to get public support for the project.

Baltimore housing commissioner, EBDI board member (and DUSP alumni) Paul Graziano compared the situation in Middle East to post-Katrina New Orleans: “There are parallels to New Orleans. Obviously New Orleans was a natural disaster, but the abandonment here was equal to it.” Similarly, Joseph Haskins, former EBDI board chairman explains: “This by no means was seen as an inexpensive project. But we saw it as a project with a lot of future implications for the city and state and the potential to become a national model of how to revitalize an area that looked like a Third World country.” Ronald J. Daniels, president of the Johns Hopkins University agrees: “I think if you look at the magnitude of the problems that the community was and is experiencing—crime, poverty, underemployment, low health outcomes—it behooves the leadership of the city to respond with an ambitious initiative. I don’t think we should say it was too much, too fast. There’s a real moral imperative here to help this community become strong and healthy.”³⁰

But others, including Mindy Fullilove, a research psychologist at Columbia University who has studied urban renewal and its impact on local communities see less benevolent intentions behind the project: “It’s an example of ethnic cleansing, American style. When they say ‘We have to clear the neighborhood out,’ they mean they have to get rid of the people there.”³¹ City Councilman Carl Stokes, has expressed a similar view: “They wanted to remove the people and those buildings and there was a good case to be made for removing the buildings, but I don’t think there’s any case to be made to remove

³⁰ All quoted in Melody Simmons and Joan Jacobson, “A Dream Derailed,” *The Daily Record*, Monday, January 31, 2011.

³¹ Ibid.

citizens.”³² Lisa Williams, a former resident who lived at 903 N. Wolfe St. and was relocated to Belair-Edison, recalled: “I wanted to come back. The intent was for them to build affordable housing, but there’s nothing to come back to purchase. What is the plan to get the residents to come back? It’s going to be Hopkins City. Who are they building for?”³³ One response comes from Ruby Lee, a life-long East Baltimore resident and community activist, who bluntly stated: “White people want this land.”³⁴

This strategy of urban redevelopment, which cynically exploits a perceived disaster situation to legitimize extreme policies that benefit elite private interests, follows the logic of what Naomi Klein has called “The Shock Doctrine.” Klein argues that free market policies are often pushed through in moments of crisis, exploiting the shock and disorientation of a public that might otherwise be more resistant. Examples of this strategy, which Klein describes in her book, include the implementation of free market policies in US-occupied Iraq, and the dismantling of public housing in post-Katrina New Orleans.³⁵ The only difference, in the case of Middle East Baltimore, is that the “disaster” was not caused by war or an extreme weather event (and negligent civil engineering), but rather by a slow-motion financial crisis unfolding over multiple decades, which systematically destroyed the social, economic and ecological fabric of the community.

The decline of Middle East Baltimore can also be understood as a symptom of what David Harvey calls “uneven geographical development.” In an essay entitled “A View from Federal Hill,” Harvey argues that while some parts of the city, like downtown and the inner harbor, experienced a boom of investment and development in the 1980s,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ In conversation with the author.

³⁵ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

other areas such as Middle East suffered from disinvestment. For Harvey, this is not a contradiction: disinvestment and abandonment are not opposed to redevelopment, they are in fact a necessary prerequisite: creating the conditions in which surplus capital can be reinvested for a profitable return.³⁶

In the 1960s the inner harbor was considered a dilapidated part of the city, the former site of the industrial seaport that had since moved farther away from downtown. By the late-1970s, city leaders recognized that something had to be done; they could not abandon the center of the city. An alliance was formed between Mayor William Donald Schaefer and Developer James Rouse, and large amounts of public money were invested to subsidize the transformation of the harbor into a festival market of entertainment and consumerism. This approach would later serve as a model for how to “revitalize” postindustrial seaports, inspiring New York’s South Street Seaport and Boston’s Faneuil Hall (both developed by the Rouse Company).

The argument in favor of such public-private developments is often based on an ideological faith in “trickle-down” economics, which assumes that private development will necessarily generate jobs and increased tax revenue, eventually benefiting the entire city. However, despite significant public subsidies (90 percent of the \$270 million dollar budget came from the public treasury), the inner harbor has failed to improve the city’s social and economic problems in any meaningful way. And like all good public-private partnerships, the developers and corporate businesses privatized the profits while the public absorbed all the risk. In the end, the majority of the jobs created at the harbor are low-paying service sector jobs, and most of the money spent by tourists at restaurants or

³⁶ David Harvey, “A View from Federal Hill,” *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 128-157.

retailers in the mall does not necessarily stimulate the local economy, since many of these businesses are owned by multinational corporations.

The New East Baltimore redevelopment project is being managed by East Baltimore Development Inc. (EBDI), a non-profit created in 2002 by the city and Johns Hopkins University. EBDI was intended to maintain the project's mission through different mayoral administrations. As a non-profit, EBDI is not audited by the city or state government. Indeed, it has functioned more like a private corporation with almost no public accountability. It's board of directors includes many of the city's top business and non-profit leaders including Ronald J. Daniels, president of Johns Hopkins University and Patrick McCarthy, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. As the city faces budget cuts, laying off teachers, fire fighters, and police, records show that EBDI has eight employees making over \$100,000 a year. One of EBDI's highest-paid employees is Arlene Conn, head of relocation services and girlfriend of housing commissioner Paul Graziano.

EBDI oversees the \$564 million in public and private funds committed to the project to date. The project has received \$214.2 million in private investment. This amount has been repeatedly overstated by EBDI, which at one point claimed it was half a billion dollars. That figure was published in EBDI's 2005-2006 annual report and later relabeled as "projected private investment."

The public share of the total \$564 million investment is \$212 million, the majority of which is from Tax Increment Financing (TIF) bonds that will take over three decades for the city to pay off with diverted property taxes. Sold to investors in 2008 and 2009, the TIF bonds financed the purchase and demolition of houses and relocation of residents

in the 31 acres of Phase 1 of the project. Repayment is supposed to come through diverted property taxes collected in the developed land that would otherwise go into the city's general fund.

TIFs have become an increasingly popular form of financing for urban redevelopment projects in recent years. When the city approves a TIF, bonds are sold to investors for money that is used to finance the project, and the bonds are repaid with future property taxes from the new development. TIFs decrease the amount of money that is needed up front for development costs, but they also decrease the amount of property taxes that flow into the city's general fund from the new development until the bonds are paid off. In the current economy, with tightened city budgets, TIFs are favored because they function like a blank check, allowing development to continue through a period of recession. Joan Youngman, a senior fellow and TIF expert at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy has observed that TIFs are “often seen as a kind of free money ... which is why they're seen as the only feasible and palatable option when a tax increase is not popular.”³⁷

The problem with the \$78 million in TIF bonds used to finance The New East Baltimore is the assumption that there will be enough development on the property to generate the taxes to repay investors. Today, the majority of the land is vacant. According to city documents outlining the TIF, the property owner—EBDI—would be responsible for the debt if there is not enough property tax revenue to repay it. If the property owner defaulted, the land would revert to the city like any tax delinquent property. However, in that case, the bond holders would not get paid.

³⁷ Joan Youngman, quoted in Melody Simmons and Joan Jacobson, “The Muddled Money Trail,” *The Daily Record*, February 1, 2011, 13.

One of the major investors in the TIF bonds was the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a Baltimore-based national philanthropy, which contributed \$27 million to support the project when the economic downturn made it hard to find investors. Doug Nelson, Casey's former CEO who is now chairman of EBDI's board, said he realized the risks in getting loan repayments in difficult economic times. "Of course, if there's no tax increment, the city can't pay us back, and so if we don't have homes and other enterprises we'll be in trouble. I don't expect the city to default on these bonds, but I recognize that this is a debt that requires a patient lender because of the time it will take to create the resources to repay the city."³⁸

The majority of Casey's contribution went towards purchasing 1,838 properties and relocating 732 households. To their credit, the amounts paid to each household were unprecedented, costing a total of \$101 million. The city and EBDI originally sought to pay the market rate of less than \$50,000 per household, but due to the organizing efforts of residents they were compelled to pay between \$150,000 and \$265,000. This is where the Annie E. Casey Foundation came in, to compensate for the higher sums required by federal law and social responsibility. However, while the above average relocation packages distinguish this project from earlier examples of urban renewal by giving residents greater freedom to relocate to decent neighborhoods, this did not account for the higher property taxes many now face in their new homes.

In response to EBDI, the Save Middle East Action Committee (SMEAC) was created by neighborhood residents and supporters in 2002, after the local newspaper announced that they would be forcibly dislocated from their homes for construction of a biotech park and new housing. A membership-based organization, SMEAC was governed

³⁸ Ibid.

by the low-income residents affected by the project. Its mission was to engage residents to participate in all aspects of decision making related to the redevelopment. While SMEAC was not able to resist the eviction of residents, it did successfully advocate for safer demolition practices to cut down on exposure to lead paint dust and asbestos, as well as more fair relocation packages for displaced households. The city and EBDI originally sought to pay less than \$50,000 per household, but due to the organizing efforts and protests of SMEAC they were forced to pay between \$150,000 and \$265,000.

In a 2006 interview, Marisela Gomez, former director of SMEAC explained: “For over four years, SMEAC slowed down, but did not stop, this redevelopment process. You don’t stop big projects initiated by Johns Hopkins University. But you can slow them down, you can seek to change the dollar amount of those whose homes are to be used and you can still struggle for the right of re-entry.” Gomez credits the success SMEAC had in organizing a disenfranchised community to their focus on a single issue that cut through the complicated and fragmented politics of East Baltimore. “SMEAC went to people and said, ‘You’re gonna lose your houses. They don’t give a shit about us, when we’re poor and black.’ We organized on this issue: the issue of equity when they went to take people’s homes. SMEAC organized around the issue of shelter. People did not know if they were going to have their houses, this urgency brought people together.” In addition, she credits the horizontal structure of the organization, which was led by affected residents: “You can’t go to the community from the outside and organize. Rather, people themselves have to decide they have the power to organize. The situation didn’t feel fair; it felt like segregation. But people felt power in numbers. They felt power in talking

about it together.”³⁹

Today, most of the area in the proposed New East Baltimore development sits vacant, with dozens of acres of grass-filled lots and over 700 boarded-up houses waiting to be demolished. This lack of progress can be attributed to the recession, the housing market crisis, and to shifts in the biotech market, on which much of the project’s investment depended. In 2003, EBDI predicted that East Baltimore would become one of “the world’s premier biomedical districts.” The original plan included over 1.1 million square feet of life sciences buildings, expected to create thousands of biotech jobs. Today only one life science structure has been built, the 278,145 square foot Rangos Building, which is only 69 percent occupied. 422 employees currently work there. This has been attributed to a “sluggish biotech market.”

We can recognize the situation in Baltimore as part of a larger pattern of accumulation by dispossession that has increased in scale and intensity with neoliberal globalization. Rapid processes of urbanization in China, India, Africa and Latin America are displacing growing squatter settlements. In these cases, where no legal protections exist to defend the rights of the urban poor, the act of dispossession is often quite literally violent, led by riot police and bulldozers.

³⁹ “Marisela Gomez in Conversation with David Harvey,” *Independent Reader*, vol. 1, Summer 2006.

6. The Right to the City

The right to the city is a concept originally developed by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre and more recently elaborated by David Harvey and other urban theorists.⁴⁰ More than just the right to access urban resources, it is the right to participate in an ongoing process of remaking the city in response to *common* needs and desires. In simple terms, it is a call for collective control and management of the built environment. For Lefebvre, the right to the city is the right to “urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete *usage* of these moments and places.”⁴¹ The right to the city is also an important political concept because unlike human rights—which are often understood as individual—the right to the city is necessarily collective.

As an ongoing process of negotiation, debate, conflict, and struggle over the form of the city—which is never resolved—the right to the city bears resemblance to the conditions of radical democracy described by Chantal Mouffe. In her book, *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe argues that “agonistic pluralism” and confrontation (the struggle between adversaries) is the very condition of democracy. For that reason, the ideal of radical democracy cannot be to reach a fixed consensus: “Such a consensus cannot exist. We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion.”⁴² In this way, the concepts of the right to the city and agonistic pluralism both share an affinity with David Harvey’s idea of “dialectical utopianism,” which

⁴⁰ David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review* 53, September-October, 2008.

⁴¹ Henri Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” *Writings on Cities* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996 [1968]), 63.

⁴² Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), 104.

acknowledges the risk that utopian spatial practice can easily slip into authoritarianism, and must therefore remain part of an open, participatory and provisional process.⁴³

In recent years, the right to the city has emerged as a concept that groups working on a range of issues can identify with. It has the potential to connect diverse struggles for affordable housing, environmental justice, prison abolition, living wages, food security, decent public education and fair development. In the United States, The Right to the City Alliance (RTTC) was formed in 2007, connecting working class organizations across the country including Miami Workers Center, Causa Justa/Just Cause (Oakland) and City Life/Vida Urbana (Boston).⁴⁴ These groups attempt to organize urban neighborhoods and sectors of the workforce in campaigns that raise demands against the state. Through direct action, political education and specific policy proposals, they fight for affordable housing, an end to displacement in the face of increasing gentrification and housing privatization, recognition of the rights of domestic workers and undocumented day laborers, access to quality public transportation, and an end to the mass criminalization of youth of color.⁴⁵ The RTTC Alliance has also connected with international movements such as the South African shack dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, demonstrating that "the right to the city" provides a powerful framework for building solidarity between urban social justice struggles in the global North and South.

⁴³ David Harvey, "Dialectical Utopianism," *Spaces of Hope* (University of California Press, 2000), 196.

⁴⁴ <http://www.righttothecity.org/>

⁴⁵ Jon Lis, "The Right to the City: From Theory to Grassroots Alliance," *Cities for People, Not for Profit*, ed. Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer (London: Routledge, 2012), 250.

7. Art, Activism and Urban Spatial Politics

I first encountered the phrase “the right to the city” in the book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, written by Rosalyn Deutsche in 1996. The book examines how socially engaged artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko use creative means to appropriate public space for artistic interventions that critically expose the exclusions and inequalities of neoliberal urbanization. Paraphrasing Lefebvre, Deutsche writes:

“The spread of abstract space continuously heightens the contradiction between the production of space for profit and control—abstract space—and the use of space for social reproduction—the space of everyday life, which is created by but also escapes the generalizations of exchange and technocratic specialization. Abstract space represents, then, the *unstable* subordination of social space by a centralized space of power. This constitutive instability makes it possible for users to “appropriate” space, to undo its domination by capitalist spatial organization. This activity, an exercise of what Lefebvre refers to as “the right to the city,” includes the struggle of expelled groups to occupy and control space.”⁴⁶

This is often how I was introduced to critical urban theory and political philosophy: through the discourse of art history and criticism. I was an art student in Baltimore at the time, where I had the opportunity to study with artist Michael Rakowitz and art historian TJ Demos. After losing interest in traditional forms of fine art such as painting and drawing, I became inspired by contemporary practices that blurred the line between art and activism, intervening directly in public space.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 76.

⁴⁷ Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users' Guide to the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

Campbaltimore

Shortly after finishing art school, I became involved in several collective projects that attempted to integrate art and activism, responding to the conditions of exclusion and inequality in the city. In 2005, Cira Pascual Marquina and her partner Chris Gilbert were both working as curators in Baltimore (Cira was at the Contemporary Museum and Chris was at the Baltimore Museum of Art). I became part of a group called the Cadres that Chris organized in conjunction with the cycle of exhibitions he curated at the BMA called *Cram Sessions*.⁴⁸ Around the same time, Nicholas Petr, Nicholas Wisniewski and I were working on a series of research-based projects about urbanism in Baltimore, and helped to coordinate a critical bus tour for a symposium that Cira and TJ Demos co-organized in preparation for an exhibition called *Headquarters* that would take place at the Contemporary Museum in the summer of 2006. *Cram Sessions* ended with an exhibition on artist-run educational institutions called *Counter-Campus*, which included presentations by 16 Beaver and the Copenhagen Free University. During that exhibition, the collective campbaltimore was founded by members of the Cadres, with the intention of continuing to organize artistic/activist/educational events in Baltimore. Shortly after, Chris moved to Berkeley for a new job, and Cira invited campbaltimore to collaborate on two projects at the Contemporary Museum.

In 2005, Cira had been working as an assistant curator at the Contemporary, when the director unexpectedly resigned, making her acting director. This created an unusual

⁴⁸ The Cadres were a 'study group' that Chris established in conjunction with the *Cram Sessions* series of exhibitions he organized at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2004-5. *Cram Sessions* was a 4-part series of month-long exhibitions (Collective Effort, Dark Matter, Sound Politics, and Counter Campus) that aimed to use the gallery as a space for education and organizing. Chris was interested in the "agency of an exhibition" to generate what he called "resistant sociality."

situation in which Cira—who identified as an activist and organizer—had a rare degree of autonomy to operate within the art institution. Campbaltimore was given full access to the offices and resources, we had keys to the building and Cira would give us the museum credit card to buy materials. When she took over, funding had already been secured for an exhibition in the fall called *Person of the Crowd*, which would have looked at contemporary art in relation to the figure of the flaneur. Unhappy with the planned exhibition, Cira cancelled it and cleverly changed the name to *Crowd of the Person*, allowing her to keep the funding (the board probably never knew the difference) and organize an exhibition about collective political agency. Cira invited campbaltimore to collaborate with the Danish artist Lasse Lau on the central project within that exhibition, called *(Re)living Democracy*, which looked at urban redevelopment from a critical perspective, specifically the situation in East Baltimore where Johns Hopkins University and the City were using eminent domain to take over 80 acres of land for a biotech park and displacing over 300 African American families who had lived in the neighborhood for generations (see part 5).

Campbaltimore collaborated closely with the Save Middle-East Action Committee (SMEAC), the neighborhood organization that had been resisting displacement, to produce a didactic multi-media exhibition. The exhibition consisted of video interviews with residents, documentary photography of the neighborhood, a library of articles on urban renewal, a large wall drawing that mapped conflicts of interest between public officials and private developers. In addition, the outside windows of the museum were boarded-up and wheat-pasted with anti-gentrification posters in a symbolic gesture of bringing the abandoned margins of the city to the center of the cultural district.

We also organized a series of public programs, including a bus tour with long-time East Baltimore environmental justice activist Glenn Ross and a discussion between David Harvey and Marisela Gomez, the director of SMEAC. Two key references for the project were Martha Rosler's exhibition *If You Lived Here* (1989) and Group Material's *Democracy* (1989-91), both at the Dia Art Foundation in New York City.⁴⁹

Between January and August of 2006, campbaltimore organized a series of collaborative events and interventions in public space. Informed by our understanding of the limits of the gallery as a site for politically engaged practices, as well as by our frustrations with the isolationism typical of conventional community organizing models in Baltimore, the group helped produce a vehicle designed to travel around the city initiating social and educational events and reclaiming public spaces. Our central hypothesis was that if community organizing in Baltimore has been hampered by the social, political and geographical fragmentation of the city, then circulation and mobility could be used as tools for community empowerment by facilitating communication and dialogue between different groups working for social justice. To this end, we converted a utility trailer into a mobile and reprogrammable platform: a hybrid stage, kitchen, infoshop, sewing workshop, free store, outdoor cinema and video studio.⁵⁰

Against the hierarchical and centralized process that dominates most forms of urban planning, the Trailer project was intended to generate a participatory process of dialogue from below, aimed at listening to and articulating the needs, struggles and desires of ordinary residents and suggesting the outlines of a more horizontal and

⁴⁹ Martha Rosler, *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory and Social Activism* (New York: The New Press, 1991). Brian Wallis ed., *Democracy: A Project by Group Material* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

⁵⁰ For a comprehensive account of the Trailer project see: Scott Berzofsky, Chris Gladora, David Sloan and Nicholas Wisniewski, "Listening, Collaboration, Solidarity," *Critical Planning*, Volume 14 (UCLA Department of Urban Planning, 2007).

democratic city.⁵¹ Though the Trailer itself was not conceived as a sustainable means of achieving the particular goals of community groups and their constituents, it was initiated to help realize a meaningful prerequisite: solidarity

Our early discussions with organizers in East Baltimore revealed community fragmentation, isolation and the inability to form stable coalitions as central concerns. Some were also frustrated with the conventional routines of community organizing, particularly working without municipal or institutional support through endlessly repetitive meetings that result in no action. These conditions left many community members disinclined to participate in organizing. With these issues in mind, we started hosting a series of dinners with local activists, students and artists, so people could informally socialize and share information about their projects and initiatives. This led to the formation of a network listserv, which is still in active use today. These dinners were also intended to be brainstorming sessions for the upcoming exhibition *Headquarters*, which sought to facilitate exchange and collaboration between the activist and artistic communities in Baltimore. The goal of *Headquarters* was to divert the institution's resources towards activist practices in the city by funding several artists' residencies and projects. The trailer was among the projects funded through the exhibition.⁵²

In the dinners we explored how groups working on specific issues—ranging from housing, labor rights, prison abolition, and the promotion of gift economies—could extend their networks or form coalitions in a functional way that still allowed them to

⁵¹ In this regard, the Trailer project was inspired by the ethics and ambition of the Other Campaign initiated by the Zapatistas in Mexico: a campaign across the entire country based not on giving speeches or soliciting votes, but on listening and sharing stories of struggle.

⁵² Theorist and activist Brian Holmes essay "Liar's Poker" is an essential reference here in relation to the tactical instrumentalization of art institutions and cultural capital for activist initiatives. <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000943.php>

retain their autonomy.⁵³ To a certain extent, the practice of the dinners themselves emerged as a model. Maintaining group cohesion, however, was often a task in itself. In the months since these regular dinners and the trailer activities they inspired, many of the groups returned to focus primarily on their own projects. Yet participants note that their projects are still informed by the relationships built during this period and are less atomized as a result. They continue to actively use the listserv, sharing information about and participating in each others' projects. Many developed new, personal relationships with multiple community groups. While it has been some time since ten or more groups have had members present at a dinner or meeting, a number of individuals now share time between more than one project and organization.

Drawing from these initial gatherings, we envisioned building a Trailer as a means for distributing information—essentially a didactic exhibition-on-wheels. But as we talked further with collaborators, including other Baltimore-based activists and the Barcelona-based collective Taller de Costura de Código Abierto (Open-Source Sewing Workshop)⁵⁴, we began to think about incorporating food and other social activities into the trailer's program to create more accessible and active situations and to extend the environment created during the dinners outward into the streets.

For one of the first Trailer events we took the group meal to a remote location, an empty lot behind the Progressive Action Center (PAC) in Northeast Baltimore. Just as we began to cook a comically large bowl of paella, torrential rain forced everyone beneath an

⁵³ Some of the theoretical texts that informed these discussions about horizontal self-organized networks included, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁵⁴ Taller de Costura de Código Abierto was composed of five artist-activist-squatters from Barcelona who had previously been associated with the collectives Las Agencias and Yomango.

array of tarps supported by the trailer. Trapped in tight confines, unsettled by the downpour, no one could organize a coherent discussion. Still, we grilled lots of food under the tarps, cranked music up over the roar of the storm, and a crazy, muddy, outdoor dance party ensued. We were joined by random people from the neighborhood who walked by and wanted to get out of the rain. Some teenagers came for the free food. Almost everyone stayed for hours, despite being soaking wet.

In some respects, it was just a party; many people bonded during the event, but none of us ever saw the passersby from the community again in organizing efforts. Yet, while the impact of these temporary social events is almost impossible to measure, this night demonstrated that food, music, the rain (and maybe a little alcohol) could help create an inclusive and unpredictable space in which new relationships and solidarities can form based on a shared, affective experience. Such a space, in contrast to that of a conventional meeting, is intellectually, physically and emotionally engaging: it produces some of the important sensibilities needed to form political solidarities that exceed shared ideology, such as affection, mutual aid, cooperation and friendship.⁵⁵

We also considered the act of reclaiming or appropriating urban space for collective social activities to be an act of resistance against the rapid privatization and militarization of space in the interests of profit and security. Yet, the act of reclaiming public space is not only one of resistance and negation, but also of possibility and invention, opening a space to unpredictable encounters and new forms of social relations. In this way, the Trailer project is directly predicated upon the concept of spatial justice, in that its interventions attempt to destabilize the discipline and control of urban space,

⁵⁵ The term affective politics is more commonly used in Spanish (*politica afectiva*) within the context of horizontal neighborhood assemblies (*asambleas*) in places like Argentina and Venezuela.

occupying space in experimental and emancipatory ways to subvert the enforced routines of consumerism and security that dominate everyday life in the neoliberal city.

When distributing food and other free goods, we found it challenging to articulate the distinction between this activity and more conventional forms of service provision or charity. While we were interested in promoting the concept of a gift economy or of other community-based reuse and redistribution programs, we did not want to participate in the uncritical practice of distributing free food to the poor (like a soup kitchen), which can ultimately be argued to sustain and symbolically compensate for conditions of economic inequality rather than fostering critical responses to them. Further, the type of one-way exchange embodied in the charity model problematically reproduces the uneven power relations based on class and privilege that we want to contest and reconfigure. We were more interested in constructing situations in which a productive dialogue can take place between heterogeneous groups of people, where conversation and debate can lead to the production of critical consciousness, formation of resistant assemblies and invention of new political subjectivities. In such situations, food and other social activities are used as a means to initiate dialogue and build relationships and solidarities, not as ends-in-themselves (even if the ends are, in fact, a more equitable distribution of food and goods).⁵⁶

Forming networks and coalitions necessarily precedes developing a determined response to specific issues. Although the Trailer begins to accomplish these tasks, it has many limitations. One significant shortcoming of all the Trailer events was their limited duration. Strong relationships and political solidarities are not built in a day. After the

⁵⁶ We were inspired by the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans, with their slogan “Solidarity no Charity.” This approach is also informed by the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast Program and Food-not-Bombs (founded in Cambridge in 1980).

summer of 2006, when the Trailer was most extensively used (the favorability of experiments in public space is directly related to the temperature outside), we began to experiment with more sustainable, long-term forms of engagement with specific communities. In examining the constraints of the Trailer, we wondered: what if we continued an event at the same site every day for a month? What if the span of an intervention was extended for a year? What sorts of relationships would result from that kind of duration and consistency?

After *Headquarters* the collective began having lots of internal debates about the tension between art and activism and whether or not the group should engage with art/academic contexts. Some in the group took an extreme position of refusal to participate in anything art related—which they perceived to be politically corrupt—and that led to the break-up of campbaltimore. This position was strongly influenced by the recent decision of Chris and Cira to resign from their jobs in the art world, leaving the United States and moving to Venezuela.⁵⁷ Some members went on to graduate school, others became more directly involved in political organizing initiatives, and Nicholas Wisniewski and I began working with Dane Nester as The Baltimore Development Cooperative (BDC), beginning a new project called Participation Park.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Chris Gilbert, Statement on Resigning, 5/21/06, circulated by email and reposted on www.metamute.org and www.ressler.at/statement-on-resigning/. For more on Gilbert's Statement see Brian Holmes and Martha Rosler, 30 and 31 May 2006, www.nettime.org; Liam Gillick, "Terms of Engagement", *Artforum*, September 2006, 125-56; and Chris Gilbert, Liam Gillick, "letters", *Artforum*, November 2006, 50-54.

⁵⁸ For a detailed discussion of the collective's formation and dissolution see: Gregory Sholette "Interview with Participants of campbaltimore," *Third Text*, Volume 22, Issue 5, September 2008.

Participation Park

Participation Park is an ongoing public art project and activist initiative, based on converting a vacant lot in East Baltimore into a sustainable urban farm and social space. In the spring of 2007, we occupied the land and began collaborating with neighborhood residents to grow food and organize social and educational activities. The park is located in a poor neighborhood that has been negatively affected by disinvestment over the last 40 years: at least half the houses are vacant and boarded-up, there are large empty lots on every block and no grocery stores. We began trying to work with these conditions and build resources from the bottom-up by utilizing the land to produce healthy food and initiating a participatory process of planning in which everyone who works on the space is involved in the decision-making process that shapes it. There were many young people in the neighborhood who would help maintain a large communal garden with no fence, we cooked food and made salads together with vegetables we grew. Several adults also had individual plots, and one year we started a worker-run cooperative to produce food to sell to local restaurants, at the farmer's market and to a small community supported agriculture (CSA) program.

In the first season, the community response was supportive. At first we encountered some indifference and skepticism. It was slow process of building trust and demonstrating a commitment to the space, since we were a group of white artists who didn't live in the neighborhood. The danger of such a project is that it will function as a beautification initiative that contributes to gentrification, so we had to actively resist that scenario by encouraging residents to take ownership of the space. As people grow food

there, share meals or just stop by for an informal conversation, the park becomes part of the fabric of everyday life in the neighborhood.

Urban agriculture is a central part of the project, but from the beginning our main interest was in land reclamation and bottom-up planning. Gardening is the currently the main activity at the park, but by calling it a park, we are trying to think of the space in a more expanded way, as an experimental social space where gardening is one activity, but where you can also just hang-out and drink a beer, have a conversation, have a neighborhood assembly, cook a collective meal, play a game. The dominant spaces in the city are based on the idea of defensible space, they are spaces of discipline and control. We want Participation Park to be a heterotopia, a space of difference and transgression, a space where unexpected encounters and new political subjectivities are possible.⁵⁹ We also want the space to prefigure an alternative to the privatized neoliberal city, to embody principles of ecological sustainability, radical democracy and alternative economics. The project has been inspired by Felix Guattari's short book *The Three Ecologies*, published in 1989. In it, Guattari argues that the only way to confront the problems we face today is through a new ethico-political paradigm that integrates environmental, social and subjective transformation.⁶⁰ The ongoing project of a community garden has the potential to integrate these three ecologies: regenerating the environment, building social relationships of cooperation and transforming individual desires and subjectivities.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, Spring, 1986. (Based on a lecture give in 1967).

⁶⁰ Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1989).

⁶¹ For more on Participation Park see: Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, "Participation Park," *Farm Together Now* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010); "A Conversation: Scott Berzofsky and Jennifer Renteria," *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, Issue 7, 2010; and Cathy Lebowitz, "Propaganda in the Garden," *Art in America*, October, 2009.

The City from Below

In March 2009, Red Emma's (a worker-owned and democratically managed bookstore and coffeehouse), the Baltimore Development Cooperative and the *Independent Reader* (a free quarterly newspaper) co-organized a conference in Baltimore called "The City from Below." Our motivation for the conference came out of our own organizing experience and a shared recognition that the city is increasingly the space in which all of our diverse struggles for social justice—for affordable housing, environmental justice, prison abolition, living wages, food security, decent public education—have the potential to come together and form something greater. As the financial crisis played out in the national news and in the spectacle of legislative action, we felt an urgent need to highlight grassroots responses to the crisis, including challenges to foreclosures, and to use the moment as an opportunity to promote an alternative vision of urban democracy: one in which the city's inhabitants themselves directly control the way the city works and how it grows—not by electing a mayor or a council person once every few years, but by actively participating in a thriving fabric of locally controlled projects and initiatives which build and manage the urban environment.

From the start, we worked under the assumption that "another conference was possible." We wanted to organize something that wouldn't solely consist of academics detached from—and above—social movements, talking to each other and at a passive audience. Instead, we envisioned a conference "from below," where social movements set the agenda and where some of the most inspiring campaigns and projects on the frontlines of the fight for the right to the city (community anti-gentrification groups, homeless advocacy groups, transit rights activists, tenant unions, sex worker's rights

advocates, prison reform groups) would not just be represented, but would concretely benefit from the alliances they built and the knowledge they gained by attending. At the same time, we wanted to productively engage those within the academic system, as well as artists, journalists and other researchers to produce a space where academics and practitioners could listen to each other and share their theoretical analysis and practical experiences. Locally, we consulted with social justice organizations in Baltimore as a part of the conference organizing process, in particular building a strong partnership with the United Workers as they began organizing for their own major event, the B'More Fair and Human Rights Zone March on the Inner Harbor. We prioritized inviting and funding the travel for groups that were working at the grassroots level in radical ways to address urban injustice, getting folks like Miami's Take Back the Land, NYC's Picture the Homeless, and Boston's City Life/Vida Urbana to Baltimore for the conference.

Significantly, the entire event was organized independently with no financial support from universities or big grant-makers, relying instead on the power and energy within our own social movement networks. This was accomplished by holding several fundraisers; getting small donations from supporters; requesting pre-registration fees; inviting local artists and several members of the Justseeds Artist Cooperative to design posters and donate artwork; asking supporters with positions at universities to leverage their access to video equipment; and relying on our amazing network of friends to volunteer their time and labor to provide everything from a free child-care program, Spanish translation, video documentation, web design, catered meals and housing for folks from out of town. In addition, none of this would have been possible without 2640, the cooperatively run events space that hosted the conference. Overall, we felt we did a

good job of living up to the Zapatista slogan from which we drew part of the conference title—“from below and to the left”—a description of a politics which starts from the bottom-up, in which the process of figuring out where we’re going and how we’re getting there is a dialogue, an experiment and a conversation in which we listen to each other and decide on our goals, our strategy, and our tactics together.

The response we received to our calls for participation (more proposals than we could accommodate in a packed three-day program) confirmed our initial assumption that there was indeed something productive about using “the city” as a way to think and act on a multiplicity of political concerns in a shared framework. As capitalism tries to give itself a green makeover, thinking about urban sustainability reveals the unavoidable connections between food supplies, public spaces, common lands, and inexcusable inequalities based in race and class divisions. Thinking about art in the city leads you to think about the role that artists play in gentrification, and drives groups, like Brooklyn’s Not An Alternative, to work out ways that cultural producers can involve themselves instead in urban social justice struggles. Thinking about social movements in the city leads you to think about how they communicate, what stories they tell themselves and others, how they preserve and transmit their own history and how they use media to agitate and organize. Thinking about the millions of people in prison in the US makes you connect the dots between a crumbling economy, institutionalized racism, and the militarized approach to policing exemplified by the “War on Drugs.” “The City From Below” was broad enough of a platform to bring together critical urban theorists with the members of a social movement mobilizing shack-dwellers and other dispossessed communities to fight displacement and evictions in the wake of post-Apartheid South

Africa's embrace of neoliberal development policies, and at the same time, focused enough that a real conversation, productive for all parties involved, might just take place.

Perhaps nowhere was this ability of “the city” to draw together multiple strands of struggle and resistance into concrete problems and potential new avenues of collective action more apparent than in the multiple presentations which dealt with the impact of the current economic crisis on the city. While, at the national level, the crisis plays out in the stratosphere of financial capital, with bailouts and bankers, the effects in the city are much more real. While fictitious assets vanish from the corporate balance sheets, real homes disappear as families are foreclosed on, real public infrastructure crumbles as budgets are slashed. Formulating an appropriate radical response to the crisis from below was a major concern of many who presented at the conference—how does a community stop foreclosures through direct action? How can foreclosed or abandoned properties be re-appropriated to provide housing for those who need it? How do we build communities of care and sustainable food systems that provide what we all need to live, outside of disastrously unstable (and fundamentally exploitative) globalized financial systems? The economic crisis is not just an aberration, but points towards serious contradictions in the capitalist system—built on the creation of speculative wealth and the transfer of power away from the people who have to suffer the consequences. This is perhaps no where more evident than in the city, where the prevailing neoliberal model of development “from above” and for the benefit of the already privileged has used imaginary property values to replace neighborhoods with condominiums, to subsidize private projects like hotels and casinos instead of public projects like schools and hospitals. The bursting of the housing bubble and the domino effect bringing down banks and insurance companies

is just a symptom of the real crisis: an economy of privatization and dispossession, undemocratic to the core, which puts the markets and profit first and the real needs of people a distant second.

Perhaps the most inspiring thing about “The City From Below” was the way in which one could see, in the various overlapping initiatives and struggles represented at the conference, the glimmers of an appropriate response. This response is one which contests the dominance of private property and private interests in directing urban development, which asserts the right of the city’s inhabitants to housing, food, and above all to dignity, and which reimagines urban space as a site of collective experimentation and the construction of alternatives rather than a territory to be controlled and managed. And this response, the outlines of which the conference helped us see, is to be constructed out of what makes the city beautiful—not politicians and bureaucrats or speculators and developers, but people living together, learning from each other, sharing spaces, working and fighting side by side, building a future together. It is not only a vision of a more just and equitable city, but of the reinvention of urban democracy that would be needed to make such a city real.⁶²

⁶²Scott Berzofsky and John Duda, “Report on the City from Below,” *Art Work*, edited by Temporary Services (Chicago: Half Letter Press, 2010).

8. Occupy

It is tempting to construct a causal chain of events to explain the emergence of a social movement. In reality, movements are more complex, fluid, and discontinuous.

Nevertheless, we should acknowledge some key moments along the path. Some have suggested that if one person could be credited for the current cycle of struggles sweeping the globe—from Tunisia to Egypt to Greece to Spain—it is Bradley Manning, the US Army Private accused of releasing classified documents to WikiLeaks. The documents Manning allegedly leaked included a set of Diplomatic cables written by the US Embassy in Tunis regarding the corruption of the Ben Ali government. As the narrative goes, these revelations of government corruption and elitism, combined with high unemployment and food inflation, created the political climate in which on December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor, set himself on fire to protest the confiscation of his fruit cart. Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked widespread street protests which eventually led to the ousting of President Ben Ali, inspiring the revolutionary wave of demonstrations in Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen now known as the Arab Spring.

While comparisons between the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring should be cautioned by an understanding of the important differences between the two contexts, the significance of Tahrir Square in shifting the political discourse in the US cannot be underestimated. Today, claims to freedom of expression and the democratic right to assemble in public space have taken on a renewed power and legitimacy that they did not have one year ago. Recall the following remarks made by President Obama on January 28, 2011, condemning the Mubarak regime's brutal repression of nonviolent protest: "I

want to be very clear, in calling upon the Egyptian authorities to refrain from any violence against peaceful protestors. The people of Egypt have rights that are universal. That includes the right to peaceful assembly and association, the right to free speech, and the ability to determine their own destiny. These are human rights. And the United States will stand up for them everywhere.”⁶³

Occupy Wall Street

We cannot fully know the constellation of ideas, experiences, intentions, and desires that coalesced in New York City in the summer of 2011 leading up to Occupy Wall Street, and I’m in no position to write that story. We do know that there were organizers from New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, and there were Greek activists who had been involved in the occupations and general assemblies in Syntagma Square in Athens. There were others who had participated in the 15 May protests and occupation of the Indignados in Madrid’s Plaza del Sol. There was a Japanese activist in town to speak about the post-Fukushima situation. There were New York-based activists who had recently staged the Bloombergville tent city to protest budget cuts in front of City Hall. And there was a group of artists and thinkers associated with the artist-run space 16 Beaver in Lower Manhattan, which has hosted events and conversations on the relation between art and politics since 1999. All were coming together to share stories and learn from the incredible wave of emancipatory struggles sweeping North Africa, the Middle-East, the Mediterranean and Europe, and to discuss how they could be transposed to New York City.

⁶³ Barack Obama, Statement to reporters on Egypt, January 28, 2011. While the recent neo-fascist police repression of the Occupy movement reveals the hypocrisy of this statement, it nevertheless set the tone for the initial liberal tolerance of political protest and assembly in the fall of 2011.

On July 13, the Canadian “culture-jamming” magazine *Adbusters* had put out a call for “20,000 people” to “flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months.” The involvement of *Adbusters* ended there, but the call gave people a new sense of urgency and possibility, and some people in this diverse group decided to take the call seriously.

An announcement for an event on July 31 at 16 Beaver, entitled “For General Assemblies in Every Part of the World,” reads:

“This Sunday is a special day at 16 Beaver, as we will be attempting to bring together reports on various struggles from North Africa, Spain and Greece, post-Fukushima Japan, and trying to connect them to contemporary struggles right here in New York and the US. The event comes together out of the interest of various individuals and groups here in New York to build upon some of these developments globally, learn from them, and put them into play here. The event also takes place in the background of various calls to mobilization, which include a call for a People's Assembly, in front of the bull near Beaver Street, on August 2nd, as well as a call to occupy Wall Street on September 17th, and an effort to mobilize an occupation in Washington beginning on October 6, 2011.”⁶⁴

The General Assembly (GA) has become one of the central features of the Occupy movement. A carefully facilitated meeting in which decisions are made by consensus, the GA is based on a long tradition with roots in the civil rights movement and the Students for a Democratic Society as well as feminism, anarchism, and even spiritual traditions (both Quaker and Native American).⁶⁵

⁶⁴ <http://www.16beavergroup.org/07.31.11.htm>

⁶⁵ David Graeber, “Occupy Wall Streets’ Anarchist Roots,” *Al Jazeera*, November 28, 2011.

David Graeber, an anthropologist, activist and anarchist who had been active in the alter-globalization movement and participated in the summer's meetings at 16 Beaver, describes the first General Assembly, which took place on August 2, at Bowling Green, just down the street from the iconic Charging Bull statue. When he arrived with some friends what they found was a conventional rally with signs and people making speeches about predetermined demands. Annoyed, Graeber and several others formed a circle off to the side and started talking about planning the September 17 occupation. Some of the organizers tried to get them to come back to the rally, but the group ignored them, insisting on having an actual GA, not a rally. Gradually all 50 people at Bowling Green joined.

There were weeks of planning to go, but an important precedent had been set. What Graeber would call the “horizontals” (the anarchists and anti-authoritarians) had broken the grip of the “verticals” (old school leftists more inclined towards top-down party politics). This would inform significant decisions to follow such as the refusal to have leaders or even designated police liaisons, the refusal to have demands, and the structure of daily GAs and working group meetings that have become central to the Occupy movement.

Over the next month the New York City General Assembly (NYCGA) held regular GAs in Tomkins Square Park in the East Village. Ignoring the law that prohibits more than 12 people from congregating in the park, the group, which ranged from 10 to 100 participants, created working groups and began planning the logistics of the September 17 occupation. On September 10, the NYCGA picked the site of the occupation: One Chase Manhattan Plaza. Then, on the night of the 16th, One Chase Plaza

was surrounded by police barricades. At about 3pm on September 17, the word went out to meet at Zuccotti Park, a privately-owned public space near Ground Zero. 2,000 people converged in the park. At the GA that night they decided to camp out, creating a model village of a different society. They also decided to change the name to Liberty Square.

The Prefigurative Politics of Occupation

While much of the discussion around the Occupy movement has focused on the protester's populist message ("We are the 99%") and lack of specific demands, I am interested in how the occupations themselves enact an alternative to the neoliberal city through the establishment of a provisional urban commons. A commons is created when the physical territory of a park, plaza or private space is occupied and recoded by a set of social practices based on the non-commodified reproduction of everyday life. Against the increasing *enclosure* (or privatization) of urban resources such as food, housing, health care, education and public space, the occupations prefigure a different city built on social solidarity, cooperation and *commoning* (or the sharing of resources in common). As McKenzie Wark observed, describing the scene at Liberty Square, "the occupations are a living experiment in communism."⁶⁶ The everyday practice of eating, organizing, sharing, learning and sleeping in a park (and cleaning up the trash), prefigures new modes of reproducing life beyond hierarchical organization and capitalist market relations.⁶⁷

In many ways, the occupations resemble recent examples of activist-oriented participatory art, such as Park Fiction, campbaltimore's Trailer interventions, or Not an Alternative's Tent City (in collaboration with Picture the Homeless).

⁶⁶ McKenzie Wark, "This Shit is Fucked Up and Bullshit," *Theory & Event*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2011.

⁶⁷ Richard Kim, "The Audacity of Occupy Wall Street," *The Nation*, November 2, 2011.

In his comprehensive account of “The Arts of Occupation,” published in *The Nation*, art historian and activist Yates McKee explores the central role that artists and cultural producers have played within Occupy Wall Street, from the Adbusters network which circulated the original #occupywallstreet meme, to the artist-run space 16 Beaver which issued the first call for a “General Assembly” at the end of July. Indeed, in a movement “defined by creative activism,” McKee argues, the very category of “art” can sometimes seem redundant.⁶⁸ From the beginning, working groups like Direct Action and Media have been populated by artists, performers, photographers, filmmakers and other cultural workers.

McKee acknowledges the influence of Situationist tactics such as *detournement* (the subversive re-appropriation of capitalist images and spaces) on the visual culture and direct actions of OWS. However, while the Situationist International was famously hostile to mass media spectacle, many of its inheritors in OWS have adopted a more pragmatic approach, which recognizes the need for mass mediated actions. This approach is indebted to the guerilla interventions of Greenpeace and the theatrical civil disobedience of ACT-UP. Alter-globalization media activism and the tactical media interventions of groups like the Yes Men have also been influential. McKee concludes that “whether one considers the proliferation of hand-made signs or the embodied media of the People’s Microphone, the Occupation has had an undeniable aesthetic dimension that goes far beyond art in the limited sense of the word. As Judith Butler might put it, OWS has reconfigured the ‘space of public appearance’ interrupting established perceptions and experiences of the city, politics and democracy itself.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Yates McKee, “The Arts of Occupation,” *The Nation*, December 11, 2011.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century in a period of unprecedented economic, ecological and geopolitical crisis, there is an urgent need to develop democratic and sustainable forms of urbanization. By 2050, the world's population is expected to peak at 9 billion (the current population is 6.8 billion). For the first time in history, the majority of people on the planet will live in cities. Three quarters of all future population growth will take place in the emerging mega-cities of the global South, where there is virtually no planning or infrastructure in place to accommodate these new residents or provide them with services.

Consider the prospect of what Mike Davis calls a "planet of slums" in relation to the recent warnings of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which claim that unless we significantly reduce our greenhouse gas emissions (80% by 2050) and therefore largely free ourselves of carbon emitting technologies, the planet will be unable to avoid some of the worst consequences of global warming, including sea levels rising enough to submerge island nations, the elimination of one-quarter or more of the world's species, widespread famine in places like Africa and more intense hurricanes.

The potential danger of these circumstances is escalated by the violent partitions and enforced inequalities of what Naomi Klein has recently termed "disaster apartheid." As Klein suggests, the situations we witness in post-Katrina New Orleans, the West-Bank or US-occupied Iraq are not exceptions to the norm, but rather present themselves as windows into a near-future terminal condition of neoliberal globalization. A world in which spatial politics have been reduced to Green Zones of privilege and security, Red Zones of poverty and war and the militarized borders that keep them separated.

Under such bleak conditions, one might ask why I am motivated to work in the field of art? My response is that I believe art is a space in which advanced interdisciplinary knowledge and experimental practices can be produced outside of the confines of other disciplines. Art can stimulate discursive projects that foster intellectual creativity and criticality. Art can expose oppression and imagine equality. Art can generate new forms of collectivity, cooperation and social solidarity. Art has the capacity to reconfigure what Jacques Ranciere calls the "partition of the sensible": the system of divisions that determines who is visible and audible as a legitimate political subject.⁷⁰ I believe that art can open a space between the real and the possible: A space in which we can learn to perceive the world differently, but more importantly, a space in which we can develop the alternative practices needed to change it.

⁷⁰ Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006).

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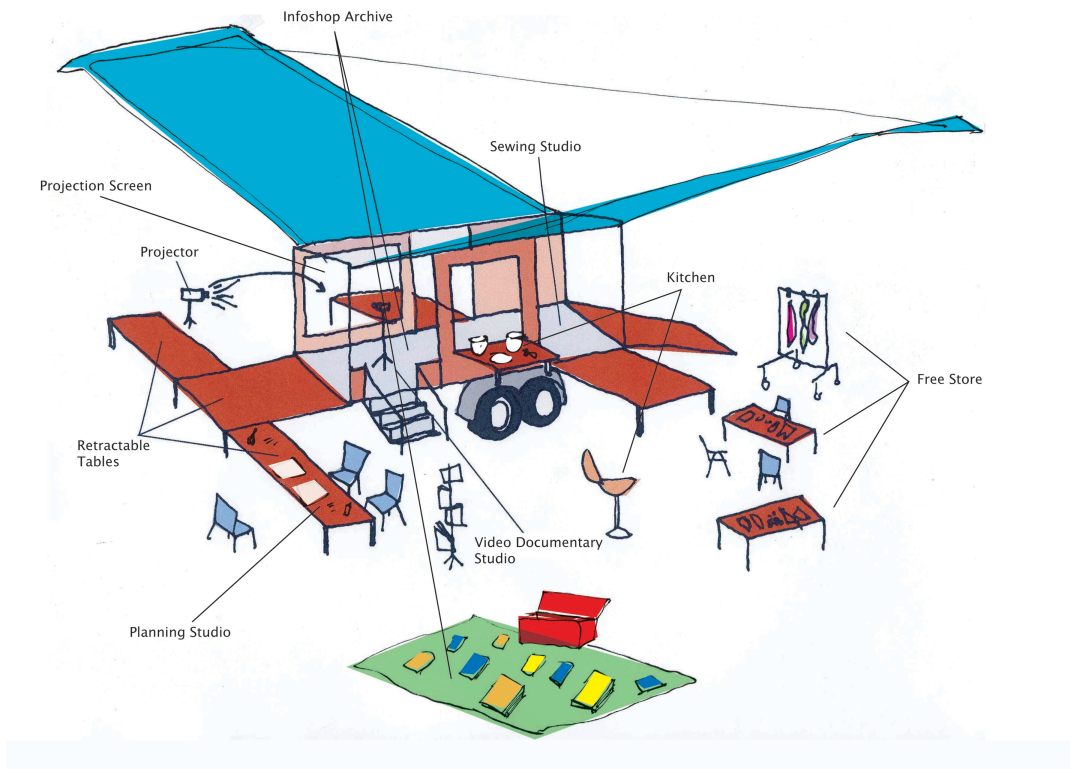
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Appendix



Trailer Project, Baltimore (2006)



Trailer Project, Baltimore (2006)



Participation Park, Baltimore (2007-10)



Participation Park, Baltimore (2007-10)



Bus Tour of Community Gardens, Boston (2012)



Bus Tour of Community Gardens, Boston (2012)



Bus Tour of Community Gardens, Boston (2012)



Bus Tour of Community Gardens, Boston (2012)



Bus Tour of Community Gardens, Boston (2012)